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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ATHENS 000972

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [GR](#)
SUBJECT: GREEKS TO ENVOY KENNEDY: WE'LL KEEP DIGGING IN
JEWISH CEMETERY

REF: ATHENS 273

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Classified By: A/POLCOUNS JEFFREY HOVENIER. REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: THIS IS A JOINT EMBASSY ATHENS AND CONGEN THESSALONIKI MESSAGE. Ambassador J. Christian Kennedy, Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, visited Athens June 25-26 and Thessaloniki 26-28 to discuss Holocaust restitution issues with Greek officials, with a special focus on the Thessaloniki cemetery. The construction of a Metro stop that may encroach on the old Jewish cemetery,s boundaries will likely continue to be a contentious issue between the Jewish Community in Thessaloniki (JCT) and Greek government officials, who argue that there is no reason to stop construction since no human remains have been found. Several Jewish NGOs outside Greece are greatly concerned over encroachment as well. During a site visit, utility trenches and other construction work were evident and may be inside the boundaries of the old cemetery. Ambassador Kennedy urged GOG officials to ensure that negotiations with the Jewish community on the compensation for the cemetery land seized by the GOG after WWII come to a conclusion soon. The Jewish community in Athens and Thessaloniki, while opposed to construction inside the old cemetery, are concerned that interventions from outside groups to stop metro construction could provoke a backlash from other citizens. END SUMMARY.

ATHENS:

MEETING WITH GOG OFFICIALS

12. (C) Ambassador Kennedy met with MFA Secretary General Aristides Agathocles and Embassy Attache Mara Ziouva to convey the international Jewish community,s concerns over digging at or near the old Jewish cemetery in Thessaloniki. Ambassador Kennedy told Agathocles that while there was no protest over the construction of the metro in Thessaloniki, he still urged the GOG and municipal authorities to work with the head of the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe, Rabbi Elyakim Schlesinger in order to ensure that no encroachment onto the cemetery take place at the metro station exits, where the greatest such risk lies.

13. (C) Agathocles argued that the GOG and municipal officials were already working with the JCT, and that he saw no reason why the USG should take interest in this matter. Agathocles, however, finally agreed that his office would contact Rabbi Schlesinger. Agathocles downplayed the possibility of finding human remains at the metro stop, arguing that the GOG had consulted experts who had assessed the probability of finding human remains as less than five percent. Agathocles gave us the impression that he and other GOG officials would likely treat this location as they did any ancient Greek archeological site. Agathocles also said he would look into compensation for the cemetery land seized by GOG after WWII, but added that he was under the impression the issue had been resolved. Ambassador Kennedy explained to Agathocles that former Deputy Economy and Finance Minister Christos Folias

was promoted to the Ministry of Development before he could resolve the issue.

MEETINGS WITH GREEK PARLIAMENTARIANS AND EU OFFICIALS

14. (SBU) Ambassador Kennedy attended a working lunch with members of parliament and the President of the Jewish Museum of Greece. Ambassador Kennedy urged both New Democracy Member of Parliament Konstantinos Markopoulos and PanHellenic Socialist Movement Member of Parliament Eva Kaili, who represents Thessaloniki, to reach out to the Mayor of Thessaloniki and local authorities to erect a Jewish monument on the University campus. Both Markopoulos and Kaili agreed to push local authorities. As the luncheon was breaking up, Kennedy asked Kaili what she thought she could do as an MP from Thessaloniki. She undertook to urge care by the Metro authorities, but was otherwise non-committal.

15. (C) Ambassador Kennedy also met with European Commission Liaison Office Deputy Director Maria Kannelopoulos to brief her on the cemetery issue and how the EU might assist. Ambassador Kennedy asked Kannelopoulos whether the EU would impede future structural funding if there were some modifications to the underground railplans Ambassador Kennedy that she would inform Brussels

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and then draft a plan on how to move forward on this issue, such as who her office should contact first: the JCT or the GOG. Although open and receptive to Ambassador Kennedy's message, Kannelopoulos said she did not understand why the JCT had not raised the issue first. Kannelopoulos added that her office would like the JCT to write a letter underlining their concerns.

MEETING WITH JEWISH COMMUNITY LEADERS

16. (C) Ambassador Kennedy met with Moses Constantinis the head of the Central Board of Jewish Communities of Greece to discuss the metro issue and compensation. Constantinis said that the metro station being built at 3rd September street, the University of Thessaloniki, would likely pass through some graves and that it was important to take all Rabbinical positions and views into account. Constantinis stressed, however, that the construction of the Metro should proceed because if it were to stop, and it was blamed on the JCT, there would surely be a backlash against the community. Constantinis also mentioned that a book, "Constantin4 sparked d edition in Greece, was written by Constantinos Plevris, a high-profile attorney whose son is a member of parliament and represents an ultra-nationalist political party. Constantinis and other Jewish community leaders contacted the office of the Prime Minister and expressed their concerns over the book's content, but the office's response was that the content fell under freedom of expression. In response to Kennedy's questions, Constantinis also said that the Prime Minister had yet to make any public statements against the book. Constantinis and other Jewish community leaders sued Plevris in civil court, and Plevris was convicted and sentenced to five months in prison. Plevris, however, appealed and an appellate hearing would take place on September 17. Constantinis was worried about the earlier verdict being overturned. He said that if they lost the trial they would take the case to the ECHR. Constantinis also expressed concern over sporadic vandalism in the Jewish cemetery in Athens, which included broken pieces of glass over the cemetery grounds.

THESSALONIKI:

METRO CONSTRUCTION INSIDE THESSALONIKI OLD JEWISH CEMETERY

18. (SBU) Ambassador Kennedy conducted a detailed tour of the future site of the "University" metro station, accompanied by Nikolaos Sideris, the Manager of Attiko Metro which is the prime contractor for the Thessaloniki metro, representatives of the GoG's Archeological Service and members of the Jewish

community. The location of the station has been controversial since two of the proposed three station entrances are very close to the boundaries of the old Jewish cemetery. According to detailed maps provided by Attiko, the station entrances appear to be just outside the boundaries of the old cemetery. Metro workers have not started excavation for the entrances yet, but they have dug utility trenches and performed other construction work on parts of the site that may be inside the boundaries of the old cemetery (ref). Ambassador Kennedy urged the Archeological Service to continue to work closely with the Thessaloniki Jewish community in the event that any remains are found in connection with the planned metro construction.

MEETING WITH ARISTOTLE UNIVERSITY OFFICIALS

19. (SBU) Ambassador Kennedy met with both Aristotle University Rector Anastasios Manthos and the university's Director of Technical Services Nikos Manousakidis. (Note: Much of the campus of Aristotle University in Thessaloniki was built on the location of the old Jewish cemetery after it was destroyed by Nazis in 1942 and the land was confiscated by the Greek government in 1944. End note) Rector Manthos acknowledged that construction work for the University Metro station might be taking place inside the boundaries of the old Jewish cemetery, but noted that old overhead photos of the cemetery show that there were no graves in the area of the station. Therefore, he argued, it is highly unlikely the construction will disturb any Jewish graves. He also reiterated that any remains found will be treated in

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accordance with procedures agreed by the GoG and the Jewish community. Director Manousakidis told Ambassador Kennedy that there are no current plans for construction on the cemetery. Ambassador Kennedy agreed to create an appropriate monument on the cemetery (Note: Consult on campus, as soon as the university had completed the research necessary to find the right location and obtain consent of the faculty senate).

MFA OFFICIAL INSISTS METRO WORK POSES NO PROBLEM

110. (C) Eleni Vakali, head of the MFA's northern Greece office in Thessaloniki, repeated the MFA view that because the local Jewish Community is not opposing the Metro construction, "there is no problem." Ambassador Kennedy agreed that the local community's views should have priority but urged the MFA to take into account the wide range of views from concerned groups around the world. Some groups consider construction or digging inside the boundaries of the old cemetery "regardless of whether graves are disturbed" desecration, he noted.

RESTITUTION: GOG COMMITTEE STUDYING JEWISH COMMUNITY CLAIM

111. (C) During his visit to Thessaloniki, Ambassador Kennedy spoke by phone with Ministry of Finance Secretary General Sidiropoulos about GoG efforts to settle (out of court) a restitution claim submitted by the local Jewish community in the 1960s. Sidiropoulos was recently appointed by Minister of Finance Alogoskoufis to take the lead, along with Diplomatic Advisor Economides, on the issue. Sidiropoulos told Ambassador Kennedy that the GoG has "made a decision to solve the problem." There was a dormant and not-fully-staffed committee appointed by the Ministry several months ago to study the issue and possible solutions will start meeting again, under Sidiropoulos's "supervision." He stressed that it now had a full complement of members. He expressed hope that the committee could make recommendations for parliamentary consideration even this summer. Sidiropoulos answered Kennedy's query about the Ministry's timeframe for parliamentary action, saying that the summer session should take action on the committee's recommendations. (He said that a special summertime parliamentary session had been set up.)

JEWISH COMMUNITY OF THESSALONIKI FOCUSED ON RESTITUTION CASE

¶12. (C) Members of the board of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki expressed their appreciation to Ambassador Kennedy for his visit and efforts. The board explained it was in a delicate position. On one hand the community opposes any construction or digging inside the old cemetery and has so informed the GoG. On the other hand, the community does not want to stir up ill will from the populace by blocking the construction of Thessaloniki,s badly needed metro system. One board member appealed emphatically for "not creating problems that we do not need" adding that the priority of the community was to reach agreement with the GoG on restitution (for cmetary land owned by the community that the GoG confiscated in 1944). David Saltiel, the president of the community, said he had recently received a letter from the Ministry of Finance stating that the committee studying the community,s restitution claim would begin meeting again. Saltiel was encouraged by the letter but lamented that negotiations with the Ministry had produced no concrete results since beginning in 2005.

¶13. (C) Comment: Although the metro station exits appear to lie outside the boundaries of the old cemetery, construction offices and materials may well wind up inside. This could be an ongoing point of contention between the metro authorities and the NGOs that have been following this project closely. Similar situations in other countries have been resolved by dialog between the NGOs and construction companies. End comment.

¶14. (U) Ambassador Kennedy has cleared this message.
SPECKHARD